

**SPOTLIGHTS**

## Widespread adoption fraud separated generations of Korean children from their families, AP finds

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — As the plane descended into Seoul, Robert Calabretta swaddled himself in a blanket, his knees tucked into his chest like a baby in the womb. A single tear ran down his cheek.

The 34-year-old felt like a newborn — he was about to meet his parents for the first time since he was 3 days old.

Most of his life, he thought they'd abandoned him for adoption to the United States. When he finally found them, he learned the truth: The origin story on his adoption paperwork was a lie. Instead, he said, his parents were told in 1986 that their infant was very sick and they thought he had died.

"I am so sorry," his birth father had written when they found each other, his words interrupted by fits of weeping. "I miss you. How did you endure this cruel world?"

Calabretta is among a growing and vocal community of victims of an adoption system they accuse of searching out children for would-be parents, rather than finding parents for vulnerable children — sometimes with devastating consequences only surfacing today.

South Korea's government, Western countries and adoption agencies worked in tandem to supply some 200,000 Korean children to parents overseas, despite years of evidence they were being procured through questionable or downright unscrupulous means, an investigation led by The Associated Press found. Those children grew up and searched for their roots — and some realized they are not who they were told.

Their stories have sparked a reckoning that is rocking the international adoption industry, which was built in South Korea and spread around the world. European countries have launched investigations and halted international adoption. The South Korean government has accepted a fact-finding commission under pressure from adoptees, and hundreds have submitted their cases for review.

European countries, along with parents, agency employees, humanitarian workers and government officials. It also drew on more than 100 information requests and thousands of pages of documents — including many never publicly seen before and some the AP got declassified — from courts, archives, government files and adoption papers.

In dozens of cases AP examined with Frontline, it found: Children were kidnapped off the streets and sent abroad. Parents claim they were told their newborns were dead or too sick to survive, only to have them shipped away. Documents were fabricated to give children identities that belonged to somebody else, leading adoptees to anguished reunions with supposed parents — to later discover they were not related at all.

The agencies and governments each played a part in keeping the baby pipeline pumping. Adoption agencies created a competitive market for children and paid hospitals to supply them, documents show. The South Korean government not only knew of fraudulent practices but designed laws to speed up the exportation of children it deemed undesirable. Western governments turned a blind eye, sometimes even pressuring South Korea for children, while promoting the narrative that they were saving orphans with no other options.

Calabretta doesn't believe he was saved; he believes he was stolen. And many in his network of adult adoptees believe they were, too.

Advocates say the vast majority of adoptions are honest and end well. But it is impossible to know how many adoptions are fraudulent because unreliable documents prevent adoptees from finding their birth families and learning the truth. Government data obtained by AP shows less than a fifth of 15,000 adoptees like Calabretta, who have asked South Korea for help with family searches since 2012, have managed to reunite with relatives.

In 2019, a Korean government agency told Calabretta they had found his father. He pictured himself as a rock on a beach, with two waves crashing over it. The first was joy — he had been loved. The other was fury that something profound had been taken from him.

"You're constantly in flux between two worlds," he said, "the one you could have and should have been in, and the one where you are."

## **"A baby factory"**

Adoptions from South Korea peaked in the 1980s, fueled by the government, just as Calabretta's parents arrived at the hospital with a blanket in which to carry their firstborn son home.

The adoption industry had grown out of the wreckage of the Korean War in the 1950s, when Americans took in the unwanted biracial children born of Korean women and Western soldiers. As it clawed its way out of post-war poverty, South Korea continued to rely on private adoption agencies as its social safety net, bringing millions of dollars into the economy and saving even more by never building its own child welfare program.

Some couples in wealthy nations desperately wanted babies, and South Korea desperately wanted to rid itself of mouths to feed.

As the supply of biracial babies dwindled, South Korea turned to those it saw as unwelcome citizens: fully-Korean children of poor families and unwed mothers.

Korean officials fit their laws to match American ones to make children adoptable for what some deride as “baby diplomacy” to satisfy Western demand. The government endorsed “proxy adoptions,” for families to adopt children quickly without ever visiting Korea, meeting them by the plane loads at American airports.

In an internal memo from 1966 obtained by AP, International Social Service, a Geneva-based organization, wrote that it suspected the Korean government assessed agencies not by child welfare standards, but by the money they brought in.

“There is quite a bit of rivalry and competition among the different agencies, and it is not beyond agencies to bribe or pressure mothers for the release of these children, and not beyond agencies to try to compete with each other for the same child,” officials noted in the document, now at the agency’s archives at the University of Minnesota Libraries.

In 1976, Patricia Nye, east Asia director for ISS, concluded in a memo that the South Korean government was “entirely irresponsible.” What was happening, she wrote, was “close to being scandalous, the mass exportation of children, Korea has been called a baby factory.”

Nye, who has died, said publicly on a BBC program called “A Traffic in Babies,” that Korean adoptions had “gone out of control.”

“We are not talking about little pets or pieces of wood,” Nye said into the camera. “It’s almost like a trade in children ... Asian children flowing from Asia to Europe and North America.”

The Korean government tried to downplay the concerns. Documents reveal an official insisted the show — which described the country’s adoption program as “baby wholesaling” — actually depicted it as “organized and well-managed.”

In December 1976, the government facilitated a new law that widened the legal definition of adoptable children, removed judicial oversight and granted vast powers to the heads of private agencies.

The government empowered four agencies to handle most adoptions: Holt Children’s Services, which had pioneered sending Korean children to the U.S., and three others, Eastern Social Welfare Society, Korea Welfare Services and Korea Social Service. A 1983 Health Ministry audit cited all four agencies and accused Holt of providing larger-than-allowed payments to impoverished birth mothers. The ministry’s response was to issue a “warning.”

alleged orphans weren't verified, some were "allegedly" by agencies as being born from unwed mothers to make them adoptable, according to Health Ministry records seen by AP. In the early 1980s, the government itself likened the agencies' child-hunting practices to "trafficking." At a meeting in 1982, documents show, the ministry admitted to child "intake" problems and cautioned agencies to improve their practices to avoid the appearance of "trafficking, profiteering." Yet the government still called for "as many adoptions as possible."

Calabretta was taken from the Red Cross Hospital in Daegu in 1986. His father, Lee Sung-soo, said an administrator told him his son had serious lung and heart problems. The family didn't have a lot of money. The only option, the administrator said, was a high-risk and very expensive surgery that could leave the baby dead or severely disabled.

She advised Lee to relinquish his son to Holt, which would pay for the surgery and find a home for a disabled child if he survived.

Lee said he signed the paper, believing it was the only way to save his son, and wept. The AP could not verify Lee's account — the hospital closed and its records were destroyed. Information obtained through a records request show that 470 children born in that hospital were adopted during the 80s and 90s.

"It felt like the sky was falling," Lee said. "I felt like my heart was being ripped apart."

By then, agencies were procuring most of their children directly from hospitals and maternity homes, which often received illegal payments for babies, records show. Though the stated intention of adoption was to spare children from orphanages, they gathered more than 4,600 children from hospitals in 1988, 60% of their supply.

"In paying rewards for childbirth delivery costs to hospitals, maternity homes, local administrative offices and others when acquiring children for adoption," the Health Ministry wrote in 1988, "the social welfare institutions (agencies) have lost their morality and have descended to become trafficking institutions."

A government audit the following year shows that Holt made nearly 100 illegal payments to hospitals during six months in 1988, worth about \$16,000 now. Eastern Social Welfare Society gave even more, now worth about \$64,000, to hospitals over that period.

The South Korean government declined to answer questions about its responsibility for the past, saying it will let the fact-finding commission finish its work. In a statement, the Health Ministry acknowledged that skyrocketing adoptions in the 1970s-80s were possibly driven by an intent to reduce welfare spending to balance cuts in foreign aid.

Lee Moo-ja, a retired local official in Boryeong city, recalled a sense of helplessness during the 1980s. Abandoned children were supposed to be

letters she sent to hospitals were nowhere.

The national government wasn't interested in enforcement, she said, leaving local officials like her powerless to stop it.

Calabretta's parents felt powerless too; they got onto an elevator with other couples holding their newborn children. All they had was the empty blanket.

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### **“Is this really all for children?”**

With the government on their side, agencies raced against time for children.

Employees were told to process them as quickly as they could, said two former adoption workers who spoke anonymously because Korean law forbids them from publicizing confidential information.

“All I heard was work faster, faster,” said one, employed at an agency from 1979 to 1984. “Do it faster and faster.”

Even now, the woman clenches her hands and clutches a pillow as she said she convinced herself they were saving orphans. She couldn't help but quietly wonder: “Is this really all for children?”

Agencies had intake workers scour every region of the country for children, she said. They invested “zero effort” in confirming a child was truly orphaned.

She questioned whether dubious practices were baked into the system, from beginning to end. A colleague once brought in a girl allegedly abandoned in Daegu, about 145 miles away from Seoul. She refused to process the girl for adoption because she thought it was too soon to conclude she was abandoned. Not long after, the Daegu worker sent the same girl again, with the same photo — but a new name and background story that claimed she'd been abandoned earlier.

The former worker said she never learned whether the girl was adopted.

Some lost children ended up overseas.

Laurie Bender was approached by a strange woman while playing in the front yard in South Korea in 1975. She remembers the woman saying that Bender's family didn't want her anymore because her mother had another baby. She went with the woman, and felt so sad she thought she might die.

Bender says she was 4, but Korea calculates birthdays differently and her records say she was 6.

That picture was displayed everywhere — in subway stations, on lamp posts, on bags of snacks that advertised missing children, the Korean version of American milk cartons. But Bender was on the other side of the globe — sent by Holt to an American family who believed she was an orphan.

The U.S. took in the highest number of orphans by far, and to be eligible for a visa, they had to have lost one or both parents to death, disappearance or abandonment. The agencies seized on the word abandonment, applying it to most of the children they acquired.

Records from 1980 to 1987 show that more than 90% of the Korean children sent to the West almost certainly had known relatives, said Philsik Shin, a scholar at Korea's Anyang University. The number of children sent for adoption was often more than 10 times higher than the police count for abandoned children, he found — close to 9,000 in 1985.

Listing children as abandoned made adoptions easier because agencies didn't have to verify child origins or obtain parental relinquishment. It was "almost customary" to document children as abandoned, said Helen Noh, who matched hundreds of children with U.S. parents at Holt Children's Services from 1981 to 1982.

Now a scholar at Seoul's Soongsil University, Noh said Holt workers understood the agency was charging adopters about \$3,000 per child.

"My salary was 240,000 won, which is like less than \$200 a month," Noh said. "If you send one child ... that amount could pay at least one worker for the whole year."

Documents obtained by AP show that agencies were likely charging even more, around \$4,000 to \$6,000. But they pocketed some of that money through improper means, such as charging for travel expenses for adoption workers but arranging for commercial passengers to carry babies instead.

Workers tried to meet specific requests from adoptive families. Some asked for siblings, Noh said, so she and her colleagues would compete over the small number of twins in their networks.

Another former worker, employed at two agencies from the 1970s to early 1990s, said anybody facing challenges in raising their children would be strongly encouraged to give them away.

"Many of the children we gathered would have stayed with their biological parents with a little help," the former worker said. "But what we heard (from management) was always the same — if we don't take that child, another adoption agency will."

Private counseling records in a 1988 Holt document obtained by AP show that some parents who relinquished their children soon pleaded for them

In one case, a mother returned and asked to see her son. The boy was still in Seoul, but a Holt worker told the mother he'd been flown to the U.S.

"After being told the lie," the worker wrote, "the birth mother began to regain her peace of mind as expected."

Susan Soonkeum Cox, who long worked for Holt International, the Oregon-based U.S. arm of the Holt adoption network, denied widespread problems. She said the goal was always to find good homes for children who would have otherwise grown up in orphanages.

"Has there been some activity that shouldn't have happened? Probably. We're human and everybody is different. There's good social workers, there's bad social workers, there's good employees, bad employees," she said. "But... the accusation of systemic, deliberate wrongdoing, that I reject."

The Seoul-based Holt Children's Services, which split from the American agency in the 1970s, and the three other Korean agencies declined to comment on specific cases.

Holt Korea has in recent years denied accusations of wrongdoing and attributed adoptee complaints to misunderstandings and Korea's social welfare issues. Kim Jin Sook, president of Eastern, has said the agency carried out government policies to find homes for "discarded children."

But some other agencies on the ground started closing their programs because of ethical concerns.

In the 1970s, Francis Carlin ran South Korea's Catholic Relief Services, which facilitated about 30 adoptions a month, compared to hundreds by the larger agencies. The demand from the West was intense, and there weren't enough legitimate orphans to feed it, he said, leading to "a lot of the compromises, a lot of the hanky panky."

The larger agencies toured orphanages, grabbing up healthy babies and leaving older and disabled children, he said.

"These, I would call them brokers, were going out and trying to get more and more children," Carlin said when reached by AP. "They would put the legitimate parent on a guilt trip and say, what are you doing? You can't afford to take care of this child.... Why don't you just step back and let them have a better life? You're so selfish."

One Korean social worker expressed disgust in words so crushing they stuck with Carlin all these years: "It's sickening, just sickening."

Catholic Relief Services ceased its adoption program in 1974. Carlin remembers standing up at a meeting of humanitarian organizations: "We are beginning to slide into the abyss," he said.

Reckoning for you.

Bender dropped the phone.

“It’s like a hole in your heart has been healed, you finally feel like a complete person,” Bender said. “It’s like you’ve been living a fake life and everything you know is not true.”

Bender and her daughter flew to South Korea just weeks later. Her mother, Han Tae-soon, wore her best outfit and lipstick for the first time in a long time. She recognized her daughter immediately in the airport and ran to her, screaming, moaning, running her fingers through her hair.

Han, who is in her 70s, has notebooks feverishly annotated with English translations, written during countless hours trying to learn her daughter’s language. Amid the photos of her children on her living room wall is a black-and-white one of Bender as a little girl, stuck in time.

Han plans to sue the South Korean government and Holt for robbing them of ever having a real relationship.

“I feel like I am dying. I really am dying,” she said. “There’s so little time for me.”

She jabbed her finger at paperwork that sent her daughter away.

“Isn’t this a government seal?” she demanded. “Why did you make this up and sell away other people’s children?”

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This story is part of an ongoing investigation led by The Associated Press in collaboration with FRONTLINE (PBS). The investigation includes an interactive and the upcoming documentary South Korea’s Adoption Reckoning, premiering Sept. 20 on PBS & online.

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## Switched identities

This system turned children into people with no history, no parents, no ties.

Many adoptees will never know the basic facts of their lives — their birthdays, their birth parents, if they were wanted or truly abandoned — because their documents are false.

Robyn Joy Park, adopted to the United States, cherished her documents so much that she tattooed her adoption number — 82C-1320 — on her back. It was her only tether to her motherland.

Park traveled to Korea to meet the woman that her adoption agency, Eastern, listed as her mother.

Their bond deepened slowly over years. They visited relatives, held hands, shared hotel rooms — the mother spoonfed her rice. The woman's son changed his name to Park Joon Young, to share the “Young” syllable in line with Korean naming traditions for siblings.

Five years passed. Park asked the woman to take a DNA test in the hope of finding her father.

They were not related. She was not Park Joo Young — she was another, unknown, girl.

“I really was so hurt and stunned and devastated and incredibly angry,” Park said. “I could only imagine what it was like for her.”

She lost touch with the woman, although she remains in contact with the man she considered her brother. Her agency offered her nothing but an apology, and declined to comment when reached by AP.

Her story is not uncommon. When children processed for adoption died, became too sick to travel or were found by their biological families, agencies often replaced them with other children instead of redoing the process from scratch, according to former adoption workers. At a meeting with an adoptee in 2021 where AP was present, a longtime worker said Western partner agencies were willing to take “any child of the same sex and similar age, because it would take too much time to start over again.”

The AP has spoken to 10 others who found that their identity was switched with someone else.

One of them, Mia Sang Jørnø, raised in Denmark, developed a close relationship with the family of the man listed as her father by her agency, Korea Social Service. She attended his funeral in 2000, even joining relatives as they received guests through the traditional three-day mourning procession.

He had given her the name of her mother, and she worked up the courage to contact her. They took a DNA test.

They weren't related.

The agency told her that her paperwork was mistaken, and she wasn't even the girl named on her documents, Park Sang Ok. She was Kim Eun-hye. She had mourned a father who wasn't hers.

“I always have this kind of restlessness,” she said, “of just not knowing that part of me, my identity.”

invented to get the adoptions through.”

“I would like to apologize for the wrong information in your adoption paper,” a KSS worker wrote to a Danish adoptee in 2016. “It was made up just for adoption procedure.” The worker could not be reached by AP.

In 2022, the agency emailed another adoptee that their “real background is different” than listed, apologizing that the discrepancy might “confuse” them.

Neither Park nor Jørnø ever found their real parents. They both think often of the girls whose identities they were given, and wonder: What happened to her?

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## “We were supposed to be a happy family”

The Korean government cracked down on the adoption industry when the 1988 Olympics brought attention to the baby trade as a national shame.

The Health Ministry instructed agencies to “improve” their practices and stop “touring” hospitals and orphanages to gather children, according to a document obtained by AP. They were told they could be punished if they continued to “competitively engage in unlawful practices.”

Adoptions plummeted, from around 8,000 a year in the mid-1980s to around 2,000 a year in the 1990s. But tens of thousands of children were already overseas, including Calabretta.

Hospital officials told Calabretta’s mother to assume he had died. She went to a temple three times to offer a Buddhist ceremony to bless the soul of the dead.

The documents that went with him to the U.S. in 1986 described him as a “normal healthy baby, adoptable,” born to an unwed mother, and made no mention of a surgery.

Calabretta returned to South Korea in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. His father, Lee Sung-soo, could not wait out the two-week quarantine and showed up outside the apartment the next day.

Calabretta threw open the window. “Dad!” he shouted.

“My son!” Lee shouted back.

“We were supposed to be a happy family, not separated. He was my precious firstborn son,” Lee said. “For over 30 years, he lived in a foreign land against his will. That makes my heart break.”

his father, the same taste in shoes and jackets and music, the same allergies.

All those years, Calabretta's mother kept the blanket she'd carried empty out of the hospital, a symbol of the absence where her son should be.

He asked her to rename him, to reclaim him, as her son and a son of Korea. In Korea, there is a sentiment that something isn't truly yours until you name it, and once you do, you must take care of it.

So he prefers his new name now: Hanil Lee.

AP reporter Lori Hinnant and researcher Rhonda Shafner and Frontline's Lora Moftah and Emily Sternlicht contributed to this report.

## COMING TOMORROW: The role of the West

Robert Calabretta blames not just South Korea but also the United States for taking him away from his parents and adopting him out to an American family.

"What higher trophy is it of domination than taking one's children and carting them off?" he asked. "The audacity of that. And it's all tied in a bow of, 'you must feel so lucky that you're adopted!'"

Western governments turned a blind eye to rampant fraud and pressured the South Korean government to keep the kids coming, an Associated Press investigation has found.

By **Kim Tong-Hyung and Claire Galofaro**

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